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NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS) AND DRL (JOHNSTONE)  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/25/2017  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS OPPOSITION HUNGER STRIKERS

REF: A. TUNIS 1294

[1](#)B. TUNIS 330  
[1](#)C. 05 TUNIS 1560  
[1](#)D. 05 TUNIS 2034

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) As they entered day nine of their hunger strike, opposition PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi and former PDP Secretary General Nejib Chebbi both appeared wan but in good

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spirits. Jribi and Chebbi started a hunger strike on September 20 to protest their landlord's effort, almost certainly inspired by the GOT, to evict the PDP from its Tunis headquarters (Ref A). During his September 28 visit to PDP headquarters, the Ambassador expressed the strong USG commitment to democracy, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. The PDP officially articulated their gratitude for Embassy support. Jribi and Chebbi attributed other diplomats, willingness to visit the PDP during the hunger strike to the precedent set by the US Embassy. They told PolOffs on September 26 that their actions have garnered international support, although authorities have taken measures to curtail the hunger strike's publicity domestically. End summary.

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Thank You  
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[1](#)2. (C) Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Secretary General Maya Jribi told the Ambassador during his September 28 visit that, according to physicians, her and former PDP Secretary General Nejib Chebbi's vital signs remain stable, but admitted she and Chebbi tire easily. Both appeared weak, but in good spirits, and remain committed to the hunger strike. In addition to the Americans, the British, German, and Dutch Embassies have also sent representatives to PDP headquarters, where Jribi and Chebbi are staging their hunger strike (Ref A). Jribi and Chebbi mentioned several times that they were grateful for the USG's support, and attributed other embassies, willingness to visit the hunger-strikers to the precedent set by the American Embassy. The Ambassador emphasized the USG's commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of association, noting that the Embassy often presses the GOT to do more to enhance democracy and key political freedoms. He applauded Jribi's and Chebbi's commitment to non-violent means of protest, but urged them to be careful with regard to their health.

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Reasoning  
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¶3. (C) Jribi and Chebbi stressed the PDP felt the hunger strike was necessary if the PDP was not to go the way of the Tunisian Human Rights League (Ref B), the Tunisian Judges Association (Ref C), or the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate (Ref D). Roughly nine of the PDP's regional landlords, with various pretexts, are already attempting to or already have evicted the PDP from their local office space. Some landlords admitted they were being pressured by government officials to evict them (Ref A). Jribi told the Ambassador that the hunger strike is motivated in part by the fact that the party feels that if the PDP, a legal opposition party, does not forcefully protest their political persecution, it would set a dire precedent for smaller or unrecognized political parties and NGOs. Chebbi indicated that the PDP would like to capitalize on public sympathy and support of the hunger-strikers by staging a rally on November 7, the anniversary of Ben Ali's ascension to the Presidency.

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International Support  
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¶4. (C) Separately, Jribi told PolOffs on September 26 that the strike has generated a sizable amount of international support. Al-Jazeera satellite channel carried segments on the hunger strike as well as on the September 23 one-day hunger-strike held by local and international human rights activists to demonstrate solidarity with the PDP. A delegation of French and Tunisian civil society activists met with officials at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on September 27 to discuss the PDP's situation, and French Senator Monique Cerisier ben Guiga sent a letter in support of the PDP to Tunisian President Ben Ali on September 25. Several Tunisian NGOs and opposition parties, such as the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate and the Democratic Forum for Work and Liberties, have also voiced support.

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Paper? What Paper?  
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¶5. (C) Despite the international attention the strike has garnered, the PDP has had some problems publicizing the strike domestically. According to the PDP and local journalists, vendors were directed not to sell the September 21st edition of the PDP's Arabic-weekly al-Mowqif which headlined the hunger strike. (Note: Several civil society contacts speculated that another reason the paper was on the "no sell" list could have been the story it carried on the GOT's cash gift to the new International School of Carthage. The school was reportedly a pet project of the President's wife Leila Ben Ali, together with Yasser Arafat's widow Suha, before the latter's precipitous departure from Tunisia (septel). End Note.) While a few select locations were allowed to display the paper, most vendors were instructed by GOT officials not to display al-Mowqif and to tell any who asked that it was not available. Vendors reportedly told the PDP that they were ordered to return all the unsold copies at the end of the week, and that they would have to account for the number of copies they were originally given.

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, PDP members reportedly continue to face harassment. On September 28, the PDP released a communique stating that Yassine Djelassi, a member of the Young PDP, was detained by police on September 27. Later, his computer was seized by police and his whereabouts are currently unknown. The press release also stated that Afef Bennaceur, a member of a committee that supported the hunger-strikers, was assaulted by police and subsequently hospitalized.

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Comment  
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17. (C) Although there is no direct evidence, there is a very strong likelihood that the GOT is behind the effort to evict the PDP from its headquarters. The efforts by landlords in several cities to deny the PDP its headquarters and other office space, in conjunction with repeated harassment of its members, has all the earmarks of a government campaign to hobble the independent opposition party. We will continue to visit the hunger strikers regularly, and will ask a DRL official in Tunis next week to join us on one of these visits. The Ambassador and other Emboffs are also coordinating with like-minded Embassies to organize other trips to see the hunger strikers. The Ambassador will raise the issue, as well, in meetings next week with senior GOT officials. At an appropriate time, we may seek action by Washington officials. End Comment.  
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